

Unearth the riches of Thorikos

Alastair Blanshard

It is all too easy to forget when confronted by the great monuments of the Acropolis and Agora that there is so much more to Athens than just the city centre. Dotted all around the surrounding countryside are archaeological sites which make fascinating day trips and allow you to get a very different perspective on this city-state. Drive a few hours to the north and you hit the sanctuary dedicated to the hero and seer Amphiaraus who would often appear in the dreams of pilgrims offering them prophecies and declarations of divine will. According to Herodotus, only Delphi rivalled this oracle in the accuracy of its predictions. On the other hand, head south and you'll find yourself at the temple to Poseidon at Sounion – truly one of the most spectacular sites in Attica (as the graffiti from travellers such as the English poet, Lord Byron attests). If you go, don't forget to stop on the way at the cave of Pan and the Nymphs at Vari to enjoy the astonishing archaic rock-carvings done by a self-proclaimed 'nymph groupie' from Santorini (itself an island with exciting Mycenaean, Classical and Ptolemaic remains). The sanctuary of Demeter at Eleusis, the plains of Marathon, the temple of Artemis at Brauron, the mines at Laurion, the sanctuary of Nemesis at Rhamnous – the list of places to visit in Attica is a long one. Indeed, you soon realise that 'city-state' is a pretty inadequate term to use to describe Athens. Athens is really a patchwork of communities, each with their own unique culture and individual idea of what it means to be Athenian.

One place with a very distinctive 'feel' and well worth a visit is Thorikos. Here you will find an impressive stone theatre, the largest tract of classical housing in Attica, some of the best preserved ancient mines, traces of an extensive fortification system, and a number of important Mycenaean tombs. These remains combined with some important discoveries of inscriptions (such as a nearly complete calendar of religious festivals) mean that visiting Thorikos provides an almost unrivalled opportunity to appreciate the complexity, fullness, and importance of life in the communities of rural Athens.

Of course, Thorikos was no ordinary community. Wealth generated by its nearby silver mines seems to have created an exceptional civic centre. Moreover, as one of the supposedly twelve original communities that came together under Theseus (see Simon Price's piece) to form the state of Athens, it enjoyed an important place in Athenian myth/history.

Buried treasure

Archaeology is very good at producing its own mythology. In particular, it seems to love horrifying stories about early excavations and the activities of ignorant, lazy or dishonest local workmen (attributes which, naturally, stand in stark contrast to the virtues of the enlightened archaeologist). There seems to be an endless supply of stories about workers using the arms of mummies as torches, refusing to work because of superstitious beliefs in the power of curses (beliefs which, more often than not, turn out to be mysteriously correct) or attempting to smuggle out precious objects for sale on the antiquities' market. The American archaeologist Walter Miller presents his own variation on these stories in his account of the excavations of the theatre at Thorikos in 1886. Throughout his report, Miller constantly complains about the treasure-seeking tendencies of his work force who use every opportunity when he is not looking to dig for buried treasure. In particular, he records that his

'Cecrops first settled the people in twelve cities and their names were Cecropia, Tetrapolis, Epacria, Dekeleia, Eleusis, Aphidna (also called Aphidnai in the plural), Thorikos, Brauron, Cytheros, Sphettos and Kephisia. And they say that these twelve were later amalgamated by Theseus to make the one city [Athens] of today.'

Philochorus (a prolific scholar/historian writing in the late fourth-early third century BC)

workmen were certain that treasure lay underneath the stone seats of the theatre and that a number of seats were destroyed in the process of looking for it.

The irony is, of course, that the stone seats are themselves 'buried treasure'. In the theatre of Thorikos we have, perhaps, the earliest stone theatre in Attica. The theatre served a number of functions. It provided a venue for performances at the local dramatic festival. According to its sacred calendar, Thorikos, like most other rural communities, celebrated its dramatic festival for Dionysus in December–January. Unfortunately, we know very little about the performance of dramas outside the metropolitan centre. Evidence seems to suggest a variety of practices and arrangements. These festivals were clearly important to their community. From surviving monuments to victors in these festivals, it seems that members of the elite were very happy to support them, especially as it provided an opportunity to win honour and prestige in their local region. The theatre also served as a meeting place for community assemblies. In this respect, its size is intriguing. Additions in the fourth-century allow it comfortably to hold 6,000 people – a capacity which rivals the Pnyx, the principal venue for the Assembly in Athens.

Building work on the theatre goes back to the sixth century B.C. However, the most interesting phase occurs in the mid-fifth century when the orchestra was enlarged and twenty-one rows of stone seats were added to the auditorium, giving the theatre seating capacity for approximately 3,500 spectators. Subsequent building work does not alter its essential structure. Unlike the theatre of Dionysus in Athens whose substantial remodelling at the end of the fourth century obliterates most traces from early periods, the theatre at Thorikos seems to provide a rare opportunity to see a classical theatre in a remarkable state of preservation. Moreover, its layout challenges a number of preconceptions about theatre design and the environment in which fifth-century dramatic texts were conceived and performed. The 'primitive' nature of the performance space has a tendency to catch people out. Miller, for example, was surprised to discover no stage buildings despite extensive excavations. Indeed, his mania for finding them seems no less passionate than the desire of his workers for buried treasure. If they existed at all, its stage buildings were flimsy or temporary. Another striking feature of the theatre is its rectilinear, as opposed to circular, orchestra, a feature which it shares with a number of early regional theatres. At every turn, Thorikos makes us rethink ideas about the way in which theatrical space is created and drama is performed.

While many have argued that meetings of the community provided training for politics, the evidence for regional theatres providing training for poets seems less conclusive. Given the importance of its theatre, it is perhaps surprising that Thorikos seems to have produced only one dramatist of note, the tragic

poet Xenocles. Almost nothing of his work survives. However, if we judge a poet by the calibre of his critics, then Xenocles' reputation would seem to be quite formidable. Aristophanes, for one, cannot resist a dig at his work whenever the opportunity arises. His reputation gets a bruising in *Peace*, *Frogs*, *Clouds* and the *Thesmophoriazuses*. Perhaps most famously, Xenocles and his family are parodied as the dancing crabs (their father's name was Karkinos 'Mr Crab') who perform at the end of the *Wasps*. Xenocles' origins in this coastal community perhaps provide extra weight to the chorus' final song about the pleasures of dancing on the beach.

Mine, all mine

It was mining, of course, for which Thorikos was famous. Indeed, there is even a play by Antiphanes, writing in the fourth century B.C., called the *Men of Thorikos* which seems to feature a chorus of miners. Mineralogical exploration of the region began in the third millennium B.C. and continues to this day. In 1985, for example, a new mineral *Thorikosite* was discovered in the metallurgical slags of the region. Sadly, this history of exploration has taken its toll on the remains. Nineteenth-century miners used the old ancient mine tunnels as the basis for their exploration, hollowing them out to provide greater access for their men and machinery. Only a few ancient side-galleries remain. Better preserved are the washeries in which the heavier silver-rich lead ore was separated out for smelting.

The large slave workforce required for this industry must have given this town a distinctive character. Certainly, an extraordinary range of foreign names (presumably slaves working in the mines) have been found inscribed on pottery and graffiti. The small, independent nature of Greek mines meant that conditions in mines were better than those in large-scale operations such as the Roman mines of Spain. Concern for safety seems to lie behind a law which prescribed a minimum width of ore pillars to prevent the roof collapsing. Nevertheless the work must have been hard and dangerous. We hear of numerous disputes over resources (e.g. labour, water for washeries), and conflicts when tunnels accidentally ran into other peoples' mines. The life of the workers stands in contrast to those who leased the mines from the State, men who mostly come from the wealthiest segments of Athenian society. In Thorikos you find everyone from the richest of citizens to the most wretched of slaves.

Alastair Blanshard edited last year's Omnibus before moving to Australia to take up a lectureship in Ancient History at Sydney. We miss him!

So what is there to see in Thorikos today?

- The theatre on the southern slope of Velatouri hill with its extensive remains including seats, stairways, and retaining walls.
- The foundations of the altar to the east of the theatre.
- The foundations of the Temple of Dionysus to the west of the theatre orchestra. Look out for the traces of a mosaic floor.
- The restored washery to the west of temple of Dionysus.
- Extensive foundations of houses and a workshop, north-east of the theatre, up Velatouri hill. These include two washeries, numerous houses, a stoa, and a small shrine to the daughter of Asclepius, Hygeia or 'Health'.
- Fortifications possibly built in 412 BC to protect the mines. Remains of a tower can be found to the west of the theatre down the slope of the hill. There are also remains of walls and towers on the Agios Nikolaos promontory to the west of the church.
- Well preserved Mycenaean tombs near to the summit, on the north and east side of Velatouri hill.